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### Passe Pas: Rethinking the Passport

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**PASSE PAS: RETHINKING THE PASSPORT**

by

**MIRIAM ELISA BANKIER**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR TRAN  
PROFESSOR MACKO**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

When I immigrated to the United States in 2007, I was unaware of the complexity of borders and the notions of citizenship. As I spent countless hours at consulates and immigration offices, I was unable to comprehend the larger political and social frameworks in place. Nevertheless, I felt scared, small, and less than human. This feeling continues to be brought about when I am around bureaucracy, particularly in immigration and citizenship settings. I wanted my project to rethink and dig deeper into childhood experiences as well as my relationship to the process of obtaining citizenship. My passports have always served as a symbol of my emotions while immigrating, and globally serve as a certificate of identity and citizenship. As formally defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary, a passport is “a formal document issued by an authorized official of a country to one of its citizens that is usually necessary for exit from and reentry into the country, that allows the citizen to travel in a foreign country in accordance with visa requirements, and that requests protection for the citizen while abroad.”<sup>1</sup> However, a secondary definition from the source is as followed: “something that secures admission, acceptance, or attainment.”<sup>2</sup> This paper will examine both definitions and how they intersect with each other.

Filled with national symbols, stamps, and basic identifying information, a passport can obscure the humanity behind the individual passport holder, inverting it from a symbol of citizenship and belonging to one of marginalization and xenophobia. In today’s political climate, the meaning of art has become intersected with politics and the law. Using the very tools and

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1. *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “passport (n.),” accessed December 3, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/passport>.

2. *Ibid.*



some processes of passport production, i.e. mixed media and printmaking techniques, *Passe Pas: Rethinking the Passport* responds to and disrupts the bureaucracy and impersonal settings involving passports and identification documents. My project seeks to push the viewer to ask questions about their own citizenship and where they feel a sense of belonging.

## **I. Theory and History**

I was lucky enough to be born with the ability to claim two passports: the Austrian and Italian. Growing up in the European Union, I rarely used my passports, and felt unaware of their role in my life. Once my family decided to immigrate to the United States in 2007, I began to gain awareness of my privilege, but also of the complicated ways citizenship and borders are regulated. When I immigrated to the United States with my mother, my two-year old brother, and 17 suitcases, we were detained because of our visas. For the next 11 years, I continued to deal with complications at immigration offices and consulates in order to be able to continue to live in the US. As soon as I became a United States citizen in 2018, I was relieved and privileged to no longer feel like I was seen as an outcast and a bureaucratic burden. My relationship to my passports is highly personal, and while I cannot speak for other individuals, I hope my experience entangled in complicated feelings resonates throughout my work. On one hand, owning a passport has been a huge privilege and source of security. On the other, it has made me feel inhumane with its bureaucracy.

When thinking about passports and identification documents, there are different kinds of privilege. There are currently over 10 million people in the world that are stateless<sup>3</sup> due to discriminatory laws, countries ceasing to exist, and some being stripped of their nationality. If an

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3. "Stateless in the United States," *UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency*, accessed December 3, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/stateless-in-the-united-states.html>.

individual has the privilege to have a passport, there is the idea of “passport privilege”, which means that there is a level of privilege that comes with different passports.<sup>4</sup> Each passport provides access to a range of countries and opportunities or denies that, making some passports “weaker” than others. For example, Japan and Singapore have been deemed as the most powerful passports of 2019<sup>5</sup> because they offer access to 190 countries each. Meanwhile, Afghanistan is at the bottom of the rankings for only providing access to 25 countries without a necessary prior visa<sup>6</sup>.

While examining passport privilege it is important to remember that there are many individuals who have access to a passport but are still undocumented in the countries that they are residing in because of the difficulty in receiving visas, work permits, or citizenship. Artist Khaled Jaarar created an art project in 2011 where he stamped people’s passports with a state of Palestine stamp in order to “send a strong political statement about our existence as human beings”.<sup>7</sup> The blank passport itself is filled with art, from the intricate designs to the hidden technologies within them. An essential part of the passport includes the pages which are meant to be filled with immigration stamps and visas. Jaarar disrupts the bureaucracy by inserting a new

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4. Karen, “On Passport Privilege and Traveling with a Weak Passport: Why I Can’t Just Pack and Go,” *Wanderlusting K*, last modified June 11, 2018, <https://www.wanderlustingk.com/travel-blog/passport-privilege>.

5. Euran McKirdy and Maureen O’Hare, “Henley Index: Japan and Singapore top 2019 List of World’s Most Powerful Passports,” *CNN Travel*, last modified October 1, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/henley-index-world-best-passport-2019-intl/index.html>.

6. Ibid.

7. Maureen Clare Murphy, “Palestinian Artist Khaled Jarrar Wants to Stamp Your Passport,” *The Electronic Intifada*, last modified July 21, 2011, <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/maureen-clare-murphy/palestinian-artist-khaled-jarrar-wants-stamp-your-passport>.

artistic notion into the monotone stamps. By giving participants of the art initiative the opportunity to get a stamp, it allows those individuals to take control of their document and show their personal opinions. With this project I hope to take control of my passport by portraying scenes that are evocative for me, as well as for others. Whether the individual feels close to the work because they see the depiction of an immigration waiting room which they have been in with family or they notice an airport scene which is familiar to them because they like airplanes, the work attempts to reach a broad scope.

Identity politics as an art term is defined as being “used to describe an anti-authoritarian political and cultural movement that gained prominence in the USA and Europe in the mid-1980s, asking questions about identity, repression, inequality and injustice and often focusing on the experience of marginalized groups.”<sup>8</sup> The art made confronts the viewer and asks questions about what kind of art that should be created. I hope sharing my experiences will allow viewers to confront their relationships to passports. The project is especially relevant in the current political climate. The acting United States President Donald Trump is harshening down on immigration policies and attempting to make it more difficult for people to obtain citizenship. Across the ocean, the European Union is facing difficulties with Brexit and the far right rising in various countries, notably in the countries I hold citizenship from. As of the end of 2018, there were over 70.8 million refugees across the globe.<sup>9</sup> Thinking about the current political relevance of this project along with my own desire to reevaluate my own experiences with citizenship as a child seems like a strong way to conclude my time at Scripps. My project will be a culmination

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8. “Identity Politics,” *Tate*, accessed December 3, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/identity-politics>.

9. “Figures at a Glance,” *UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency*, accessed December 3, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance>.

to the academic work I have completed at Scripps, as well as the experiences I have been able to have outside of the classroom.

The history of the passport incorporates many facets of philosophy, sociology, and politics. The word passport originates from the French, “passer”, to pass, and “port”, port. Thus, the title of my project is a play on words, using the origins of the word but replacing port with “pas” which means to not in French. The origins of the passport are unsure, but since writing was invented in 3000 BC, the passport was created around then. The passport was issued for travel in its first meaning but has since evolved to be much more than that. Martin Llyod, in *The Passport: The History of a Man’s Most Travelled Document* writes, “in the earliest times it was an introduction, a protection and a facilitation. As the rule of monarchs became more established, the passport was recognized as a tool to control a population, be they your subjects wishing to leave or those of another allegiance wishing to come in.”<sup>10</sup> Starting then, the passport began to be used as a means of control and power. In 1856, the USA introduced a law that gave the Department of State the only mandate to issue American passports and added a fee of \$1 to be paid if someone wanted to go overseas.<sup>11</sup> The passport transformed from a folded piece of paper, to a piece of paper with a photograph, and then to a small booklet. My work takes note of these formats, as the pages from my series hang off the wall opened like a passport page. The first time the passport was discussed in an international framework was at the International Conference on Passports, Customs Formalities and Through Tickets in 1920, where they named the physical characteristics of the international passport. The document “should contain thirty-two pages, all

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10. Martin Llyod, *The Passport: The History of a Man’s Most Travelled Document* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 2003), 50.

11. Ibid., 81.

numbered. It should be in at least 2 languages—the national language and French. Its size should be 15.5 cm by 10.5 cm. It should be bound in cardboard, the front cover bearing at the top the name, in the center the coat of arms of the country and at the bottom the word ‘passport’. Also, it should only be issued for a period of two years”, but it could be extended.<sup>12</sup> This caused a lot of arguments, and not all countries involved agreed. Even today, each passport showcases its own intricacies according to the nation, but it keeps the same size, and a large amount of the same security measures.

“Is the passport a restriction or a facility, a munificence or a revenue earner, a weapon of control or a tool of freedom?”<sup>13</sup> Martin Lyod asks in the conclusion of his book on the history of passports. However, the answer depends on how you look at the passport, your experiences, and whether you have the opportunity to own one. My work questions its meaning, and the complicated history that came with it. The passport has become a symbol of nationalist identity for some. The documentation of individuals in the United States has greatly changed and evolved over the years, going from passports issued only for a very select number of individuals, to over 132 million American citizens having passports.<sup>14</sup> Before, the passport was not as important to travel, but as borders are being enforced more strictly, the passport has become more important. It serves as a symbol of allegiance for some, and also a symbol of pride. Adál Maldonado’s *The Passport*, 1995 from the series *The Spirit Republic of Puerto Rico* (ink on paper) stood out to me

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12. Ibid., 121.

13. Ibid., 259.

14. Craig Robertson, “How the Passport Became an Improbable Symbol of American Identity,” *Smithsonian.com*, last modified February 7, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/how-passport-became-improbable-symbol-american-identity-180962064/>.

at the Harvard Art Museum's (Fogg Museum) exhibition "Crossing Lines, Constructing Home Displacement and Belonging in Contemporary Art." Maldonado employs the language as well as the apparatuses of government bureaucracy to create a satirical and critical piece of art which addresses broken identities as a result of colonialism. The artist, thus, in a similar way that I chose to do, reproduces aspects of the passport in order to critique it.



Figure 1: Adál Maldonado, *The Passport*, 1995, From the series *The Spirit Republic of Puerto Rico*, Ink on paper, Fogg Museum, image by author

The passport, through its physical aspects, can serve as a sort of reflection of the country itself. For example, the pages of the American passport show landscapes and quotes reflecting American ideals. The use of patriotic colors used in the flag indicate patriotism and a very specific vision of the United States. The eagle, a predatory symbol of nobility and freedom is shown in the passport multiple times. The visions of the United States are views that most Americans would not be able to see, as the landscapes show an older vision of the United States, excluding technologies and cities. Citizenship has come to mean much more than that. The Austrian and Italian passports do not show specific landscapes, but various colors and designs highlighting their seals and membership to the European Union. The design of these passports

and passports in general has been critiqued, such as artist Saul Steinberg did in his *The Passport* book and art series. In his art, he used a lot of the well-known symbols of passports and identification documents to recreate his own fake ones. Specifically, he uses fingerprints and stamps to issue his own documents. My project draws from his bold critique and uses of ink and printmaking materials. For example, he replaces faces with fingerprints, taking one identification factor and replacing it with another. I am particularly fascinated by his use of fingerprints which personally seem to be a means to critique the lack of personality and uniqueness.

Surveying my own passport, as well as the history of the passport has caused me to ask myself if I can even create my own passport and if I believe there should be a passport at all. Even further, do I believe in borders? Tom Sachs, a contemporary artist, put together his own passport office at a London gallery in 2018, making Swiss passports for any person willing to pay 20 Pounds.<sup>15</sup> His performance highlights the privilege of having a passport by making the visitors pay and critiques the bureaucratic process as a whole. His work inspires mine to challenge the notion of global citizenship, and the passport itself. My work seeks to examine my own pre-made perspectives on my citizenship, as well as to look at my own story with a global viewpoint.

*Passe Pas: Rethinking the Passport*, a set of seven 10x7 inch prints uses printmaking while working with ink, watercolor and pencil. The passport is a printed document, which allows the documents to be uniform and safe. Nowadays, because of security reasons, the printing process is intricate. In creating art prints, there are different kinds: relief, intaglio, lithography,

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15. Naomi Rea, "Tom Sachs is Issuing Swiss Passports Out of His London Gallery in an Epic 24- Hour Performance," *Artnet News*, last modified October 5, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/tom-sachs-passport-office-1364971>.

monoprint, and screen print on diverse kinds of paper.<sup>16</sup> Nations have used diverse techniques in printing their passports in order to ensure that there were not forgeries such as watermarked paper that can only be seen in the light, a blind embossing stamp, fine lettering in fugitive and reactive ink, intaglio printing, and UV light.<sup>17</sup> This allows passports to be unique and difficult to reproduce. However, every passport can eventually be reproduced because it may have flaws or if the reproduction information is somehow obtained.

The passport is a printed document, and it is always evolving through the stamps and visas printed onto it. The ink stamps and signatures done by immigration are a part of its continuous evolution. Leonard Combier, an artist, takes that notion even further by drawing directly on passport pages, around stamps and playing with them. He allows the individuals to have some sort of liberty within their issued document and have something unique to them.<sup>18</sup> Leonard Combier's work emboldens me to think about relational aesthetics, and the way I can make my work inspired by relationships and social contexts that citizenship and physical documents create.

## II. Process

My process of creating *Passe Pas: Rethinking the Passport* began with a close look at the passport pages on the three passports I own. Every passport is different; while the American

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16. "Introduction to Printmaking," *Washington Printmakers*, accessed on December 3, 2019, <http://washingtonprintmakers.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/PrintmakingIntroduction.pdf>.

17. Llyod, *The Passport*, 224.

18. "Passport Drawings," *Leonard Combier*, accessed on December 3, 2019, <http://www.leonardcombier.com/passport-drawings>.



document shows landscapes and symbols representing the United States, the Austrian is more abstract and subtle, and the Italian colorful and intricately filled with patterns. Thinking about Martin Llyod's *The History of Man's Most Travelled Document* I started to consider the ways that these pages made me feel. Using these emotions, I began to formulate questions, such as "What does your passport mean to you? How does it make you feel?" I used the questions to facilitate journaled thoughts with myself, but also with members of my family, friends, and acquaintances. While focusing on my own story, I wanted to hear other people's relationships to their passports. From these questions I was able to formulate my own word bank, comprised of words such as "lucky, stressed, privileged, status, patience..." Using my responses to these questions, I imagined my own landscapes and symbols that remind me of those same feelings. From this came an initial series of dry points, which used photos I took at the airport, familiar scenes from immigration, a re-interpretation of my own visa photo, and scenes where I felt at home. As I ran these dry points through the press for the first time, I realized in what ways ink changed the way the paper looked and decided to use dark blue ink, as seen on stamps and inside the passport pages. The prints, when not fully scrubbed clean, surfaced a nostalgic energy, which I appreciated. When I initially presented these prints to faculty and peers, I thought that I would use them to create a large-scale collage. However, the feedback I received pushed for laying the prints directly on top of each other and creating a multilayered print.

Creating multiple layers meant that I had to generate more content. I thought deeper about symbols, specifically the ones I have seen in passports. I also began brainstorming what the opposite of the individual symbols could be. Initially, I wanted the prints to be hard to understand. I aspired for the viewer to go through a decoding process. As I printed an eagle's claw, to symbolize the eagle as the national animal and how it is viewed as royal symbol, I

realized the print did not feel like it directly connected to the passport. Rather than looking powerful and royal, it looked like a chicken's leg. I also explored Italy's, Austria's and America's national flowers and bound them together. I understood the symbolism and the bouquet of flowers meant a lot to me, however, most people who viewed the prints did not recognize the flowers and were unable to relate them to national symbols. Nevertheless, I found success in my prints that were more focused on scenes rather than on abstract symbols. I decided to keep seven of them. As I reviewed the number of prints with faculty, it became clear that the seven prints were meant to offer an overall vision of the passport.



Figure 2: Overview of *Passe Pas: Rethinking the Passport*, photo courtesy of Jacqueline Legazcue

These seven prints, in my opinion, looked stronger on different sheets of paper than they did on one. Thus, I decided on seven separate prints. For these prints, I doubled the size of the passport for visibility reasons. Throughout the semester, I toyed a lot with scale, wondering if I should try to make my project as one large-scale work. I decided on this 10x7 inch paper (double of an open passport) because it seems large enough to examine closely, but I enjoy the closeness to passport size. I tore off the corners in order to make them appear rounded, just as the pages of the passport. This, along with the ruffled edges of the paper, gave it a rustic look. As a

background, I wanted to soak the paper in watercolor to give it a beige, brown, red look, just as the passport pages are. The paper is meant to soak up water in a specific way, so getting the watercolor to stay on the page was very difficult, and it ended up looking different than I had envisioned. However, as I ran prints through the press on top of the watercolor, I felt like the image was brought together in a fitting manner. My objective was to adapt enough features of passport pages for the artworks to be recognized as being linked to passports. I also wanted to put myself in that format in order to critique the passport from within.



Figures 3 and 4: Details of *Passe Pas: Rethinking the Passport*, photo courtesy of Jacqueline Legazcue

In conjunction with working on these landscapes, I dry pointed my own immigration and visa stamps in different sizes, copying the ones in my own passport and layering them on top of the landscapes. Then, I used watercolor on vellum to layer the emotions in place of the dates and signatures. By doing so, I felt like I was taking back ownership over marks made in my passport, as well as letting a personal aspect come out of the pages that are so bureaucratic. I also added my own fingerprints on two prints, alluding to the use of the fingerprint in the process and drawing from Saul Steinberg's practices. As a last layer, I used pigment and pen to reimagine the geometric textures on the passport with a more imaginative lens. Although the colors used for the shapes are similar, I avoided using rulers or measurements as I did not want to replicate the

technology and bureaucratic process. I sought to bring out in what ways the shapes can be seen as works of art.

While making these seven prints, I did not imagine a narrative to be flowing through the pieces and to have them be in conversation with each other. However, as they all laid in front of me, a narrative appeared. The first depicts the waiting room for citizenship and immigration services. The second shows the machine where fingerprints are scanned, and photographs are taken. The third portrays an individual holding a passport over a similar desk to the one in the second. In the middle print my own visa photograph is printed out surrounded by the textures of the passports and my own fingerprint. The fifth print showcases stanchions with a crowd behind them, alluding to an airport scene. The sixth shows crowds of individuals waiting at an airport to go through immigrations. In the last print, the viewer looks out of the window at the airplanes going to their respective gates. Throughout the seven prints, there are one or two stamps layered, each showing words of emotions, which at times are in conversation with one another. For example, in the last print, the stamps are “patience” and “stress.” They reflect a lot of the emotions I have struggled with, feeling stressed about the process and for my citizenship, but not being able to do anything but to be patient. While installing these pieces, I decided to have them

open, as if they were passport pages, with my own visa stamp in the middle in a corner to link the narratives together.



Figure 5: Detail of *Passe Pas: Rethinking the Passport*, photo courtesy of Jacqueline Legazcue

As I mounted my work, I felt a sense of relief, but also excitement for the future. I believe that the images I chose depict important emotions; however, I want the work to connect to my viewers even more. I also wish to add some complexity to the images by tying in the prints I had deemed were too unrecognizable. I struggled a lot with the idea of adding numbers; such as page numbers or the codes present on some passports. I decided against it to keep it at a more personal and less bureaucratic angle. I also felt conflicted about the way the pages hang on the wall because they have a little bit of a messy and disorganized angle. On the one hand, that focuses on the creative and personal aspect of art, however, aesthetically speaking, I am unsure if I am happy with it. During my critique, I got feedback suggesting I dig deeper into my individual experience by creating a book, but also that I should consider including the community in my artmaking. At the Harvard Art Museum's (Fogg Museum) exhibition "Crossing Lines, Constructing Home Displacement and Belonging in Contemporary Art", there was a box drawn on the wall (see figure 6), which had "I belong" in big words inside it. That addition to the exhibition works to involve the visitor and to play with the idea of boxes in categorizing

individuals. I take example from initiatives like these to form my project for next semester. I also received comments suggesting I think about various ways to display my works, perhaps in an installation where pages are falling onto the ground, connected by strings, or a bound book which would make them easier to interact with. These comments resonated with me and push me to be excited for next semester's project.

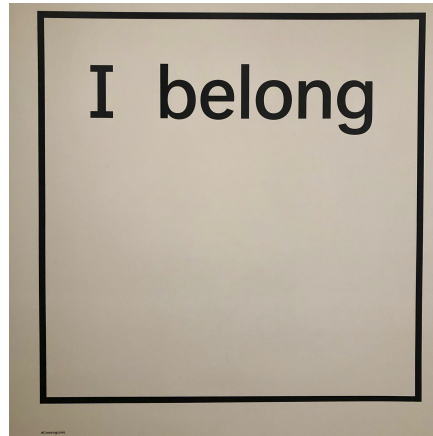


Figure 6: *I Belong*, Fogg Museum, image by author

## Conclusion

When I immigrated to the United States in 2007, I was unaware of the complexities of borders and the notions of citizenship. However, as I finish this thesis, I feel deeply connected to the complexities and the multiplicity of the theme of citizenship. *Passe Pas: Rethinking the Passport* pushed me and continues to push me to question myself, my privilege, and my perceived notions. Using instruments and processes of passport production, my work responds to the bureaucracy of passports and seeks to move away from the bureaucracy by tying in personal aspects such as words of emotions, my own reimagined textures, and familiar scenes. I hope that the viewer can find a feeling or landscape they recognize and think deeper about their role within the bureaucracy.

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